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# Tourism and its discontents. Suri–tourist encounters in southern Ethiopia\*

## Tourism as an ‘avant-garde’ of globalisation

Tourism is big business – the biggest in the world. Apart from its economic aspects, the social and cultural impact of tourist activity on local societies and places deserve attention. Tourism exchanges are predominantly about the production and valuation of images and ‘exotopic’ experiences (Harkin 1995). In its present, late twentieth-century form, tourism is the expression of a particular kind of consumer identity with a global, and globalising, impact. It emanates largely from societies that are relatively powerful and wealthy. Communities and places visited by tourists often undergo unforeseen changes due to the visitor’s unrelenting presence. While both positive (Boissevain 1986; Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994) and negative aspects (cf. Sindiga 1996, Peake 1989) can be recognised, in most cases an essentially ‘transformative’ role of the exchanges between tourists and locals is notable, though these need more extensive study in emerging contexts of globalisation (here defined as a transformative process of intensified contacts – via mass and electronic media and migration – between human collectivities and communities in the economic, political and cultural domains, forging new and more pervasive interrelations and dependency between social and cultural units of varying scale).

This article is a reflection on the encounter of foreign tourists with the Surma or Suri<sup>1</sup> people of southern Ethiopia, a relatively small ethnic group only recently ‘discovered’ by the tourist industry. As well as describing the encroachment of tourism among these people, I intend to give a cultural critique of tourism. Seeing tourists at

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1 Especially among neighbouring groups they are known as *Surma*. Most commonly used self-names are Chai and Tirma (two sub-groups).

work was a phenomenon which initially rather disturbed me while doing field research.<sup>2</sup> The first question, of course, might be why an ethnographer should feel at all disturbed. Some critics will jump in to say: 'Because there are "hidden similarities" between tourists and anthropologists, as affluent westerners or uninvited guests, among a culturally different group – similarities which generate some kind of guilt and insecurity about the epistemological basis of the latter's research activities'. We can respond to such a remark with a qualified yes: there is, on one level indeed a similarity in that the tourist and the ethnographic praxis are both strategies for 'framing the exotic' (Harkin 1995: 667). But on this trivial level anthropologists can also be said to share characteristics with pilgrims, businessmen, missionaries, or anybody entering a for him/her new social setting – a not uncommon experience for people also in their own society. Furthermore, this argument leaves us little wiser about *what is actually happening* in such 'inter-cultural encounters', about their different shapes, or about their historicity.<sup>3</sup> An anthropological understanding of tourist-'native' interactions needs to aim at explaining the preconditions, the structure and meaning of the tourist encounter, with reference to the interests and cultural models that are articulated in that setting.

Case-studies of how globalisation and emerging consumer identities actually manifest themselves in empirical settings remain the basic stuff for cultural analysis and comparison. The present study of the Suri is offered in that vein. It locates the activities of both tourists and social researchers theoretically in the changing field of inter-cultural exchanges in contemporary conditions of globalisation.

Tourism is a kind of 'vanguard' of globalisation and yields a contagious consumer identity *par excellence*. It is contagious because it imposes itself as the dominant global exotic strategy to deal with cultural difference. Owing to its ubiquitous presence in the media, in advertising and in international business, the discourse of travel and tourism tends to exclude or push away other viewpoints. It can be said to be a hegemonic system of representation which may function as part of the (unconscious) *ideology* of globalisation. In this context, tourism deserves much more empirical and theoretical exploration, as Dennis Nash has suggested in a recent overview (Nash 1996: 179). However, in contrast with previous tourism studies '... the voice of the other [i.e. those visited by the tourists] needs to be given its due' (*ibid.* 196). In this article, an approach along these lines will be followed by systematically paying attention to the responses of the Suri towards tourists.

The Suri, an agro-pastoralist group of about 28,000 people in the utmost south-west of Ethiopia, are an interesting case because of the fact that it is not their geographical area (the beaches, forests, mountains, game parks, etc.) but *they themselves* that are the prime attraction for the tourists<sup>4</sup>: a 'real primitive, untouched tribe'. This is how they are advertised. The Suri are indeed a marginal group in Ethiopia, and with a high degree of cultural integrity. But the idea of their being untouched or isolated is

2 Ambivalence toward tourists is, of course, not uncommon among social science researchers. Middleton 1991 considers tourists on the Swahili coast 'cultural illiterates' (1993: vii) and sees the tourist trade as 'a final form of colonialism' and as 'the most degrading exploitation of the Swahili coast'. (*ibid.* 53).

3 Neither would the persistent ambivalence of the tourist enterprise be explained. Why do tourists get irritated by other tourists, and why is the general image of tourists invariably so negative? (Cf. the quotations on the first page of Urry's 1990 book).

4 In contrast to, for example, coastal tourism in Kenya (Peake 1989; Sindiga 1996).

obviously incorrect. They have been involved in wide-ranging regional trade-flows of cattle, gold, arms, ivory and game products since at least the late nineteenth century, and have for the past two decades been affected by the Sudanese civil war and by Ethiopian state efforts to incorporate them politically, economically and socially. The production of their reputation of 'primitiveness' and 'remoteness' is in the first instance a phenomenon or problem to be explained from the perspective of the tourists. They are the consumers of images of 'authentic experience' and of 'exoticism' that are carefully screened and constructed. These images function as commodities like any other and a growing part of the tourist industry thrives on them. In exploring some aspects of the tourist encounter, this article will contend that when people instead of nature or buildings are the object of such commoditised images, tourism often leads to friction or conflict.

### **The semiotics of tourism**

Theorising on tourism has been done within a variety of frameworks, among them neo-Marxism (MacCannell) and semiotics (Culler, Urry and Harkin). It is less interesting to present a list of possible motives for tourist behaviour (such as nostalgia, the quest for the unknown, breaking the daily routine, rediscovery of the self, etc.<sup>5</sup>) than to inquire into some of its formal, systematic aspects. Recognising that there are several different types of tourists or 'modes' of tourist experience (cf. Cohen 1979: 183), it might be possible to identify some of these formal aspects. In this respect we follow some leads of Michael Harkin's very interesting semiotic approach (Harkin 1995).

From a semiotic perspective one can say that the tourist experience is initially marked by an 'anxiety about authenticity' (*ibid.* 653). Tourists expect a kind of credibility and genuineness about the objects, places and people they visit; they expect the latter to be contained in a system 'whereby a set of signs marks the object as authentic', so that their attention can be focused. The tourists can thus be given an orientation vis-à-vis their own framework of familiarity related to their 'centre', i.e. their own society. In other words, the alterity of the other landscape or the other people should be appropriated (*ibid.* 655). This implies a hegemonic strategy, domesticating the exotic (*ibid.* 656). This semiotic enterprise, of course heavily supported by photography (see below), is evidence of the search of tourists for predictability in the new context of meaning. Culture difference as such is not problematic in such a scheme, but it should be marked clearly. The tourists expect such a minimal semiotic frame wherever they go.

### **Identity and difference in the contested field of global encounters**

In the encounter of Suri and tourists, extremes meet. Suri have always been at the margins of the Ethiopian state, even though they nominally belong to it since 1898. They were wary of outsiders – Ethiopian soldiers, traders and administrators, Italian colonisers and visiting white tourists. A politically and economically largely self-sufficient society, they always tried to assert their way of life and group identity towards

5 As treated in MacCannell 1976; Cohen 1979; or Urry 1990.

others. Questions of identity and difference have thus been a vital issue in all their relations with non-Suri.

In the past decade, the Suri have been visited not by mass tourism but by a 'select' crowd of tourists who have seen all the regular mass-tourist destinations and who like to think of themselves as 'adventurers and explorers'. In the 1980s, a few travel agencies in Italy, the United States, Germany (and several expatriate Italian and American travel-agents with an office in Addis Ababa) started advertising the Suri as a destination for this category of tourists (in the classification of Valene Smith 1989: the 'explorers'). This attracted small groups of western, and later also Japanese and other, tourists looking for an adventurous or exotic vacation 'off the beaten track'. In the case of the Italians, one travel agency used a slogan indicating that the tourists could retrace the historical routes of some nineteenth century Italian explorers to southern Ethiopia (like Cecchi, Vannutelli, Citerni and Bottegò). The reputation of the remarkably informative *Guida dell'Africa italiana orientale*, the publication of which was one of the first acts of the Italian occupation force in the country to legitimise and 'normalise' its presence there, also played a significant role in creating Ethiopia as an Italian 'tourist destination' (Consoziazione Turistica Italiana 1938). Tours were booked on which the visitors could take a plane to the grass airstrip near the small provincial capital of the south-western Maji district (the airstrip marked with a sign saying 'The Wonderland Route', put there by a tourist agency) and then make a walking excursion with pack-mules and native porters into the Suri area. There the tourists lodged in tents, looked at the local people, took photographs of them and engaged in some typical tourist bartering for material objects (lip-plates and ear-discs) as souvenirs. After spending a few days they left as they had come.

As we can see, the tourist interest in the Suri is undoubtedly based in part on 'exoticism', the idea of going to a remote, isolated wilderness area 'where hardly any whites had set foot' and where people are assumed to live in 'pristine conditions of nature'. This may go back to the renewed fascination in the (post)modern industrial world with the 'radical others' outside industrial culture – and this time, thanks to the techno-economic conditions of globalisation, it can be pursued as a mass-phenomenon. There is also a lingering heritage of the colonial gaze. As Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1994: 435) note: 'Tourism gives tribalism and colonialism a second life by bringing them back as representations of themselves and circulating them within an economy of performance'. In the early eighties – before the tourist influx – the Suri were already known to a wider public, through folklore and tourist-guide texts,<sup>6</sup> as an exotic, strange, primitive people at the ends of Ethiopia (which was itself a relatively unknown tourist destination). The Suri appearance was also fascinating: the women and girls wore big clay or wooden discs in their pierced lower lip and ear-lobes, and the virtually naked males had fine physiques and remarkable body scarifications and decorations made with bright natural paints.<sup>7</sup>

The coffee-table book and *National Geographic* article by photographers Fisher and Beckwith of 1990 and 1991 summarise this image of difference in a telling way. Their work contains a series of excellent photographs of the Suri, albeit only of some aspects of their way of life. The pictures evoke the impression of a very out-of-the-way and self-contained, 'happy' culture of complete African 'others', in a somewhat

6 One of them an Ethiopian one. See N. Donovan and J. Last 1980. *Ethiopian costumes*, 24–25. Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Tourism Commission.

7 Of course, one can recognise in this something of the 'Riefenstahl-syndrome'.

romanticised way. The shots also appeal to the image of a remote, well-integrated and proud culture – almost the ‘noble savage’ of old – and indeed, they help to *create* this image. We see here a typical contemporary representation of a ‘tribal group’ for the public eye of modern-industrial society, the genre of the exoticist, post-colonial photography of ‘natives’. Needless to say, apart from granting that they may contain useful information and evoke fascination, what the pictures convey to us is incomplete<sup>8</sup>. They are not meant to be informative and analytic, but primarily evocative and aesthetic. We see that the image created by them is – as always with visual representations – in large part a reflection of the preoccupation or selective interests of the observers. As the photographic evocation of the Suri makes clear, both in professional and tourist form, difference and contrastive identity are essential elements in the encounter of opposites. Indeed, there is no effort, or indeed intention, by either Suri or tourist to come to a ‘mutual exchange’ or an ‘understanding’ between tourist and ‘native’ except a purely business-like one (The photographic act is a major ingredient of the touristic appropriation of the Suri, a point further discussed below).

The inherent bias in the representation of the Suri, and of the tourist–Suri relationship (particularly acute in their case, as we shall see) is of course neither new nor surprising. It is rooted in the very encounter of ‘whites and natives’ in non-western parts of the world, conditioned as it is by tacit epistemological canons of colonial experience or a still in essence colonialising gaze. The Horn of Africa is no exception. A brief historical retrospect makes this clear.

### The image of the Suri since 1897

Following the various, scarce descriptions of the Suri in travel and colonial literature, one sees that the image of ‘primitiveness’ was an inherent ideological element of the colonial penetration of the Sudan–Kenya–Ethiopia borderlands from the start.

The first to mention the Suri was the Russian officer A. K. Bulatovitch (though he did not call them ‘Surma’ or ‘Suri’). He was travelling with a contingent of Emperor Minilik II’s army which campaigned in the Southern Kāfa area in January–April 1898 (see Bulatovitch 1900; 1902). Other than that the people must have been the present-day Suri, not much can be inferred from his brief references. Bulatovitch states that on 16 March 1898 the troops descended from the Beru area (which is in the country of the Dizi people) towards the west, into the valley of the Kari river. Here they met a people resembling, he said, the ‘Sciuro’ (i.e. the Me’en, a neighbouring agro-pastoral people). The following remarks then confirm that this must have been the area of the Suri: ‘*Le loro donne sono orribilmente mutilate: esse si forano il labbro inferiore e gradatamente allungandolo e allargandolo ci fanno entrare un disco di legno del diametro di 3 pollici*’ (*ibid.*). The author notes that the natives also extracted their lower incisors. The inserting of lip and ear discs by the women described here is even now a distinctive custom of the Suri.

Bulatovitch’s troops did not engage the Suri in battle. He notes the reaction of the natives to the passing troops: ‘... les indigènes, en apercevant la colonne abyssine, abandonnaient leurs habitations et s’enfuyaient sur les collines, d’où ils indiquaient la

8 Good explanatory text might have helped here, but G. Hancock’s chapter on the Surma and related groups (in Fisher and Beckwith 1990) leaves much to be desired; the Fisher–Beckwith article of 1991 contains very little text.

route à suivre du bout de leurs lances, exprimant ainsi le désir de voir leur hôtes déguerper le plus vite que possible' (Bulatovitch 1902: 256).

After Bulatovitch, the Suri are mentioned again in an article by a member of the British border demarcation commission, C. Gwynn (1911). He was in the area of the 'Surma tribe' in 1909, and met what he called the 'chief of the tribe' established at Turmu, an escarpment north of Mt. Naita, a big border mountain between Sudan and Ethiopia. Gwynn said that their women wore 'indescribably hideous' wooden or leather discs in the lower lip (Gwynn 1911: 127).

Like all travellers after them, these two European observers felt the need to comment on the lip-plate custom and its unaesthetic appearance. This physical detail overrides all other information on this group, and emphasising it has set a pattern reflected in all popular articles and tourist brochures written about the Suri since, including the article and book by Beckwith and Fisher (1991; 1992).

From 1936 to 1941, Fascist Italy occupied Ethiopia. The first reports on the Suri came from Italian travellers, businessmen and researchers from that period.<sup>9</sup> The mining engineer C. Viezzer was probably the first to describe the Suri and publish photographs of them.<sup>10</sup> He pictures them as a group living in very 'primitive conditions', without cattle, cultivating poorly with primitive tools (Viezzer 1938: 424–5). He praises their colourful body-painting and general physique, but predictably abhors the female custom of inserting wooden or clay plates in the lower lip. He was one of the first to take photographs of this decoration, thus initiating the act so often repeated by visitors and tourists today. Viezzer also describes rituals he observed, such as the spectacular burial of the wife of a chief, and songs and dances, about which he feels urged to say that they are done '*nel modo piu disordinato*' (p. 424); of course, an absurd statement, especially when one knows that in reality they are highly organised. The language of the Tirma strikes him as primitive: '*suoni gutturali, animaleschi, assolutamente incomprensibile*' (*ibid.*). Viezzer's picture of the Tirma-Suri is, of course, very incomplete, and characterised by a predominantly negative or condescending evaluation of their way of life, fed by the author's ignorance of how such a society works.

F. Rizetto (1941) also stayed among the (Tirma-)Suri, but for a longer period than Viezzer. His report contains much more factual information on the group and adds some qualifications about their character as a people. One can frequently hear an echo of his remarks on Suri character among their present-day highland neighbours. For example, Rizetto notes (but perhaps in his turn echoing local highland opinion) that they are 'ignorant, violent, thievish, arrogant and revengeful'. But, he says, they are also proud of their country and their freedom. They go naked, but are generally of good build and health (Rizetto 1941: 1204). They live isolated, in blissful ignorance of the world outside, and on a primitive, timeless level (*ibid.*: 1205, 1209). Rizetto's closing paragraph summarises his biased view of the Tirma as a stable, unchanging, dull, but also free society: *Scende la sera ... e ognuno rientra al misero tucul [= hut] per riposare sul duro giaciglio a ciotola, senza altra aspirazione che quella di trascorrere*

<sup>9</sup> Viezzer 1938; Marchetti 1939; Rizetto 1941.

<sup>10</sup> Although Arnold Hodson, British consul in Maji in the early 1920s, published a photograph of the 'Kachubo'-Surma (the Kachepo or Balé-Surma living on the Boma plateau in Sudan) in 1929. See Hodson 1929: 207.



*altri giorni – sempre uguali – di libera vita di boscaglia, così come li hanno vissuto i padri e i padri dei padri, nella serenità della più completa ignoranza.*’ (*ibid.* 1211).

In 1938, the Suri were studied by M. Marchetti, an Italian working for a private company. He passed four months in the Suri area and describes their three original sub-groups, then known as Tirma, T’id and Zilmamo, in fairly detailed terms. Marchetti, though no social scientist, is the first to try to present a more balanced, matter-of-fact survey of Suri society, refraining from extreme evaluative statements about their character or level of cultural or intellectual development. He gives information on settlement patterns, cultivation practices, material culture, ornaments, food consumption, supernatural beliefs and customs related to marriage, burial and, what he called, the ‘stick fight’. Nevertheless, towards the end the author concludes his description with remarks about the ‘low level of social life’ of the Suri, who are also ‘*assolutamente infantile come mentalità ed intelligenza*’ (Their counting system ‘was underdeveloped’) and they have ‘*una lingua assai semplice*’, their speech accompanied by expressive mimic, and often repeating words (Marchetti 1938: 71). They are said to miss an oral historical tradition transmitted from parents to children – they only retain memory of the most recent events (*ibid.*). Despite a good start, we again see the account ending in questionable, evaluative statements on the basis of outsider values, not very informative about Suri culture itself.

Of all pre-Second World War travellers, it was Marchetti who stayed longest among the Suri. Comparing his account, whatever its deficiencies, with others, we may conclude that the reliability of the information given correlates positively with the time he spent with the people. This correlation still holds today, of course. Tourists, however, are not privileged to establish significant rapport with the people because of their ephemeral stay. Indeed they do not *intend* to: it would spoil the very idea of the ‘authentic experience of an exotic and remote tribe’.

In the post-war years (after 1941), there were few foreign or Ethiopian visitors in the Suri area. There was a nominal presence of the Ethiopian government until 1988 (when the few police and soldiers left the area), some intermittent tax collection, and a short-lived American mission post in the 1960s, with an elementary school (up to fourth grade) and a small clinic. None of these episodes left any lasting imprint on the local society, and no reports are available from this period up to 1990.

Almost until today, the Suri have been part of a neglected and marginal area of Ethiopia, without roads, facilities and government services. This area had the image of being a poor and unhealthy malarial lowland, where no Ethiopian would go of his own free will. The Suri people were considered ‘uncivilised nomads’ without a fixed abode. The Maji area also served as a place of internal exile. Under the Mengistu government, army commanders who had failed in the civil war were sent there to spend their days as civil servants. In the wider regional context, however, the Suri were never isolated. In the early decades of this century, they were connected to the cattle, game and ivory trade in Ethiopia and Kenya. In the 1980s they smuggled in automatic weapons from Sudan and got involved in the gold trade (panned in rivers in southern Ethiopia) and with a network of Sudanese and Ethiopian traders.

In the early 1980s, the Suri were ‘rediscovered’ as a piece in what was stereotypically known as the ‘museum of peoples’ of Ethiopia.<sup>11</sup> Some tourist agencies started organising individual or small group trips to the Maji area, including Suri country. Some of the tourists

11 The Italian scholar C. Conti Rossini was the first to call Ethiopia ‘un museo di popoli’, in his book *L’Abissinia* (Rome 1929: 20).



came with a guide from the Ethiopian National Tour Operators (NTO, a state agency), some with a personal guide from a private travel-agency. Recent travel guidebooks on Ethiopia make mention of the 'colourful' Suri, describing their primitive material conditions but also their body-painting, lip- and ear-plates, and their spectacular ritual stick-duelling contests. Practical conditions for the tourists were difficult, but this was part of the attraction: to chart an allegedly unexplored culture at the margins of civilised society.

In actual fact, tourist trips regularly had to be cancelled for security reasons. To this day, foreign visitors upon arrival in the area may officially be forbidden by the local authorities to go down to the Suri because of fear of disturbances.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, in the 1990s, several hundred tourists have visited the Suri, and this steady flow will continue for the near future.

## **The Suri and the tourist: exchanges and confrontations**

The interaction of Suri and tourists is more of a 'confrontation' than a normal social interaction. Obviously, the language difference is the first problem. The Suri are monolingual and the Ethiopian guides do not speak the Suri language, so 'conversation' is carried out by means of gesticulation and shouting. Prior to the contacts with tourists, the Suri had only known white foreigners in the shape of Italian soldiers in the 1930s and American missionaries in the 1960s. They relate that their experience with them (i.e., with the first *aránjai*, their Amharic-derived term for 'white foreigner'<sup>13</sup>) was much better than with the tourists, basically because, as some Suri said, 'they were there for a long time' [several years] and 'tried to get along with us. They traded things, like food-stuff, cattle, sheep, and tried to talk with us'. However, the Suri quickly found out that the tourists of today were quite different from these earlier foreigners. Below, we look at the interaction from the two ends of the dyad.

### **The Suri view**

The response of Suri, both men and women and the older and the younger generation, is remarkably similar. No doubt, the tourist presence will in the near future create a sub-group of Suri youngsters that can make a living on it and who will thus suppress any feelings of disdain. But at present the Suri are rather uniform in their display of bewilderment and irritation towards foreign visitors. Two kinds of behaviour strike the Suri as most characteristic of the tourists: taking photographs all the time and behaving in a childish, rude and incomprehensible way, to the point of being bizarre.

Photography is of course a quintessential activity or posture of a tourist. It was noted by Susan Sontag in her pioneering book *On Photography*, that from the point of view of the tourist, the 'very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel. Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter' (Sontag 1977: 10). While this is true in a general sense for all sorts of tourists, in the case of the explorer-tourists among the Suri, there is the desire for 'authentic documentation' of the otherness of these people (and occasionally for

12 When I was in the field, in 1994, a group of German tourists was called back by the authorities and had to fly back to Addis Ababa without having seen the Surma.

13 Amharic is the nationwide Ethiopian official language.

commercially marketable pictures<sup>14</sup>). However, Sontag has definitely hit on a defining element of the tourist: as a travelling person s/he wants to make sense of his/her experience, and needs to 'frame' it in some way, and to relate it to his/her own world. This calls to mind Harkin's analysis (see above) of the tourist experience as a quest for framing and structuration of meaning through the management of a set of signs rooted in the tourist's own life-world.

One aspect of the photographic act is especially pertinent to the Suri case. As Susan Sontag has noted: 'To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and therefore, like power' (Sontag 1977: 4). The Suri being photographed are aware of this more than any other people and act accordingly: they say that no one should have this power over them, or if so, that it should be compensated for by means of an appropriate monetary transaction.

Sontag also made the, by now very familiar, point that there 'is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera' (*ibid*: 7). This is easy to observe in Suri–tourist exchanges. If an argument comes up over a specific photographing act, as is often the case, reactions very often take on an aggressive form: people are manhandled and those photographed try to get hold of the camera. In the case of one Japanese tourist group visiting in 1989, cameras were forcibly taken from them, thrown on the rocks and destroyed. Suri irritation at cameras and photographing has nothing to do with the fear often ascribed to non-western people that their 'soul' or 'well-being' are being taken away. Nothing of the kind. In this as in other things, the Suri are rationalists: they are well aware of how a camera works and what comes out of it. They only resent being 'turned into an image or a souvenir' (Sontag 1977: 9) which is taken away, and being limited in their interaction as adult humans with tourists they thought were other adult humans.

During fieldwork, observing interactions between tourists and Suri – always stunted because of translation problems and the insecure interpretation of gestures – I often noted Suri responses like: 'You are not going to shoot me just like that. First give me the green notes! (money)' or 'For every one of us in the picture you pay us one note, now!'. Turning towards me, they said: '*NgaJon*, are they all like that, bothering us before they have done their duty and given us things? Tell them to co-operate!' Other comments included 'What is their aim' 'What is it they do? If we are being fooled, we will not allow any picture taken here!' and 'Can we deal with people who behave unfairly?'

Such remarks illustrate the Suri dislike of the absence of equal exchange with the tourists. The apparent value tourists attach to taking pictures of them, but not taking their time and not communicating with them bred deep irritation. Suri often forbade tourists outright from taking pictures or even sitting in their village; they also asked what they knew were outrageous prices for some of their cultural items (lip plates, wooden stools, leather decorations, calabashes) when tourists expressed any interest to buy them. In doing so the Suri ridiculed the tourists' wish to have everything. Tourists even wanted the special ivory bracelets worn by male members of the chiefly clan, but did not know these can never be sold.

Similar responses have been noted among the Mursi, the people neighbouring the

14 This was the case with the Beckwith-Fisher expedition of 1988, and of one Belgian tourist-photographer of my acquaintance, who toured among the Surma in 1994. Both came back with pictures which they used in publications, or which they were able to sell or exhibit publicly.

Suri, who are culturally very much alike.<sup>15</sup> The only difference is perhaps that the Suri are in general more annoyed and aggressive in demanding money for photographs, and actively obstruct photography if tourists try to duck payment.

Photography is an essential element of the tourist gaze (cf. Urry 1990: 140) – it expresses the token appropriation of the objects, landscapes or people. The photographic act thus illustrates the underlying tourist concern with the visual, the aesthetic representation of experience. Here lies the link with the characteristic tourist desire for the consuming of ever new images and experiences which makes him/her the quintessential expression of post-modern consumer identity. As Sontag has already noted (1977: 24), ‘needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted’. In semiotic terms, the picture becomes for the tourist not only the visual sign of ‘having been there’ but also of having captured the ‘reality’ of the signified.

In the literature it has often been remarked (cf. Urry 1990: 10) that tourist behaviour exemplifies licence, a release from everyday obligations and norms – ‘liminal’ behaviour. The manners and ‘civilisational standards’ of tourists may or may not be greatly at variance with local mores, especially in very divergent cross-cultural settings. But the very structure of the encounter is a determining factor in bringing out behaviour among tourists which is beyond ‘normal’ bounds. The temporality, displacement, language difference and perception of ‘distance’ seem to cancel out the need for meaningful or respectful social contact, or some element of reciprocity. In the tourist game, a relationship is a commodity, and as the fleeting encounter of people will not ever be repeated, freedom from reciprocal norms seems guaranteed. Restraint or respect according to the local norms is secondary. The people visited are, so to speak, just part of the landscape, not meaningful social partners: a landscape cannot (and should not) have an opinion about people, as Nietzsche once said. But what is usually not treated in much detail in the literature on tourist–native interaction is the *actual* behaviour of tourists in their contacts with locals and the effect this has on the latter.

From numerous interviews and observations I noted that the Suri and their neighbours (Dizi and village people, who usually act as guides and porters for the tourists) are amazed if not shocked by the ‘dirty’, ‘uncontrolled’ and ‘shameless’ demeanour of the tourists. They fart in public without inhibition, they urinate and defecate in plain sight of the porters and local people; males and females kiss and embrace each other in public; others frequently argue and shout to each other, often the couples. They also quickly show anger and other emotions ‘like children’. This is all contrary to local standards of decent or adult behaviour. Perhaps this kind of public behaviour is unacceptable, or at least questionable, in the tourists’ own society. But the point is that

15 When asked what they thought tourists were doing, the Mursi people (a group very closely related to the Surma) told the anthropologist D. Turton: ‘*You* tell us. Why do they shoot [photograph] us? ... They can’t speak our language so we can’t ask them why they are doing it ... They come with Ethiopian guides who just sit in cars. When the tourists have taken their photos they drive off. We say: ‘Is it just that they want to know who we are, or what?’ We say: ‘They must be people who don’t know how to behave’. Even old women come and totter about taking photos. ‘Is that the way whites normally behave?’ That’s what we say. Goloñimeri [the Mursi name for Turton], what are they doing? Do they want us to become their children, or what? What do they do with the photographs?’ And finally: ‘This photography business comes from your country – where the necklace beads grow. You whites are the culprits. Give us a car and we’ll go and take pictures of you.’ (Turton 1994: 286). See also the Granada TV film on the Mursi, called *Nitha* (‘Disappearing World’, 1991).

here, in the 'liminal phase' which trekking represents, tourists think they can afford to dispense with ordinary standards and manners because they suppose the natives have no such manners either. These 'natives', however, were offended time and again, and their former image of the 'polite' or 'developed' foreigner became seriously dented. As a result, scorn and disdain are becoming the dominant feelings toward foreigners. Originally, Suri (and Mursi) approached white foreigners with some kind of awe or respect, expressed in their using the term *barári* – which means 'having power' or 'being hot', in the sense of 'dangerous' – for them.<sup>16</sup> Today, this word is never used for any tourist.

### The tourist view

The other end of the dyad, the point of view of the tourists, must also be looked at. Here, the effect of the encounter is also upsetting. The main reason is that the Suri do not behave as the tourist frame of reference expects them to behave. If the tourist encounter is seen as a kind of ritual, i.e. as a form of 'scripted play' with some predictability or at least markedness, then the Suri do not give evidence of wanting to recognise that script. Numerous incidents illustrate this pattern. I take a few from observations and interviews with tourists in 1992–1994. The base line in all these stories is the feeling of deception, indignation and anger.

- One group of Italian tourists (in 1994) came to a village to meet Suri but were sent back after they refused to pay the money for photographs and the daily 'tourist tax'. They said they had already paid that money to the national tourist organisation, and the government for their visas. They were adamant; but so were the Suri, and as the latter had automatic rifles, the Italians did not insist. They went back without taking any pictures.
- In another incident in 1994, a small group of German tourists were threatened at gun point to give money, medicines, clothes and razor blades. Some girls in the group panicked and dramatically started begging the Suri men not to shoot. Others started crying. In a state of shock they left the area.
- One elderly American couple with a private guide whom I met shortly after their return from the Suri area in 1995 told me of their utter disappointment and indignation about having been subjected to constant shouting and pushing by the Suri, who incessantly demanded money and other things. They said they had cut short their visit among them, and that they 'had never met such impolite and rude behaviour anywhere in the world'.
- A Belgian tourist who was in the area in late 1994 was asked to pay huge sums of money because of his desire to take hundreds of photographs. His main interest was, as he phrased it 'to see and photograph naked tribesmen in their original state, untouched by outside civilisation'. He stated that he loved the country and people, and would stay long among them; but finally he just had to pay up and only then could move through the area. Afterwards, he expressed to me his disappointment and indignation at the efforts and financial sacrifices he had to make to get his pictures. He said he loathed the Suri for their extreme monetary greed, and would never visit them again.

16 This term is also applied to the innate 'power' of their religious chiefs and to certain ritually important plants.

- In 1990, a group of about 20 Japanese tourists were bathing in the Kibish river, which runs in Suri territory. When they came out, they found that all their clothes, cameras and bags had been stolen. Great indignation. No Suri claimed to have seen the thieves. After long deliberations with some local Suri spokesmen, some of the things were recovered. The tourists quickly left the area, baffled and disturbed.

In Ethiopian terms, the Suri are exceptional in their response to tourists; indeed, no other group in Ethiopia demands money from foreigners who come to visit them. In 1996–9, the Suri asked 150 *birr*<sup>17</sup> per tourist per day to be paid to their newly founded Suri Council, in addition to the money paid for individual photographs).<sup>18</sup> Nor do they mind being assertive, even aggressive, in their dealings with foreigners who come there for a few days. They say that this is their country, so the people who visit them should pay for being there, and they do not trust the motives of tourists. Few local populations harass or threaten the tourists during their actual ‘meeting’: in most places the ‘realist illusion’ is somehow kept up because of the material benefits that accrue. Obviously, Suri also want the material benefits, driven by a logic introduced or made acutely relevant by the tourist presence, but underneath this attitude lies a deep irritation about the perceived power difference and the arrogance of tourists not wanting to engage in meaningful contact. Their tactic is not one of terrorism, but it is one of intimidation; my own impression is that they would be even more violent if their religious leaders did not restrain them.

It is interesting to note that the travel-agents who sell these trips do not warn their customers about such problems (except in very general terms, so as to make them appear part of the attraction of the trip): they do not intend to disturb the illusion of realism before they have despatched their clients and cashed their cheques.

In analysing staged Maasai performances for tourists on the farm of the British-Kenyan Mayer family, Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1994: 467) remarked that ‘the Maasai and the Mayers are merely players in a show written by international tourist discourse’. The Suri are an example of the opposite. They give clear evidence of a refusal to be incorporated as actors in the triadic tourist game (Suri–state agents/guides–foreign tourists). In a radical way they refuse to act as a party in the relationship, rejecting its terms and thus their inclusion into a system of meaning devised by others. In contrast to peoples who have been exposed for longer periods to external contact and who are willing to see the advantages of an encounter with tourism – the Balinese, the Maltese (Boissevain 1986), the Toraja (Volkman 1990) or the Maasai (Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994) – the Suri consciously intend to keep the visitors at bay. If they do respond to them, it is in a remarkably exploitative way; for them, tourists are the last in a long line of visitors who intend to incorporate them into their scheme of things, be it the state administration, the colonial structure (the Italians), the army, tax gatherers, etc. They resist them like they have resisted the latter: by militant and aggressive self-assertion.

17 150 Ethiopian *birr* was about US\$ 25 in 1996.

18 That no Surma outside this council does benefit from it, is of secondary importance. In November 1999, the zone authorities under which the Suri Council is administered have ordered that this practice of asking ‘tourist money’ be abolished.

## **The clash of identities and the reinforcement of group boundary**

The meeting of Suri and tourists described above refers to a relatively new contact situation: before about 1988, the Suri were simply not visited by tourists. But the friction is probably common at all locations where tourists are now an established feature of the social landscape. A study of such a situation in its 'pristine form' reveals an ultimately irreconcilable clash of cultural interests between the locals and the tourists, despite all the compromises and accommodations which are developed later when it has become clear that the tourists will not leave the place alone.

We might also say that in the encounter of Suri and tourists, 'violence' is produced (cf. Mudimbe 1994): both symbolic (because of imposition and power difference) and physical (pushing and hitting, stealing of property and threats, sometimes at gun point). The second could be seen as a response to the first. The tourists – though equipped with plenty of money and material goods – feel very tense, and come to see their being there as involving an element of force. The conditions of discourse and 'exchange' are imposed, meaningful contact is precluded, they are obliged to constantly negotiate on commercial values: money for pictures and for objects, gifts of razors, soap, cloth, etc. There are no reciprocal terms of exchange known in advance but only exploitative ones, realized in what both parties know is a, not to be repeated, one-off encounter.

All this inhibits and structurally precludes normal social exchange. What the tourists do not immediately see is that this clash is predicated upon their very motive of their coming there, as adventurous would-be explorers with their 'social centre' (Cohen 1979: 183) elsewhere but who come to discover the unknown Other, a 'remote primitive tribe'. This explorer experience goes back to an old western topos and still functions as an ideological trapping cultivated by the travel agencies that market such trips. It may or may not be related to the cultural ambiguity of modern industrial society with its lingering nostalgia for a lost past (Graburn 1996: 166) and its residual feelings of alienation (MacCannell 1976). More importantly, it must be seen as part of the great tourist game of producing 'realism' in an unambiguous, marked domain where people from both sides are expected to 'follow the rules'.

From the point of view of the tourists, their encounter with the Suri is a case of 'failed framing': because of Suri resistance to the social model of subordinate exchange and rendering of 'services', most (though not all) tourists feel disoriented. They, as white visitors, are pushed back to their elementary identity as 'intruders' and are confronted with the limited power of their resources (money) and status (as 'white, developed' people). Their illusion of authentic realism is punctured, and their image of a pristine tribe with its own codes and customs happily and generously shared with outsiders, shattered. One could say that the Suri have become so 'authentic' – with their very original 'rude, savage and uncontrolled' behaviour – that they defy the tourist script to the point of breaking it up.

The Suri example shows once again that the confrontation of 'otherness' – both for the tourist and for the local people visited – can reinforce group consciousness. Increased contact between ethno-cultural groups does not automatically lead to mutual understanding or the management of difference. More often it leads to the opposite.<sup>19</sup> In

19 The conditions under which exposure to, and experience with, cultural differences reinforce group boundaries, and generate antagonistic images or actual conflict are not yet well addressed in globalisation studies (cf. Sindiga 1996: 431).

this case, of course, this outcome is exacerbated by the fact of spatio-temporal remoteness reproduced in the very encounter between locals and tourists: the latter will go back and are there *because* they cherish the fact that they are on the verge of going back to their social peers – which allows them to gaze at the differences separating them from those who will stay there in their full ‘otherness’.

For the Suri, the encounter initially produces a redrawing of their group identity as ‘strangers’ to the visitors. As remarked earlier, they are acutely aware of this fact. Their group consciousness – traditionally already characterised by high self-esteem, by a strongly shared normative culture centered on cattle, and by a tacit contempt for all others – is also reinforced by their actual dealings with tourists. Their disdain for them has underlined their conviction that only they themselves are what they call ‘real adult people’ (in Suri: *híri mú*). While they appreciate the ingenuity of some of the material culture items the tourists bring, they cannot take tourists seriously as people. Inadvertently, therefore, their exposure to tourists may have brought about a revaluation of their own way of life.

### **Suri, tourism and development**

We have noted that Suri resist their unquestioned annexation into the tourist discourse, and in their encounter with tourists develop more self-consciousness about the value of their own ethno-cultural tradition. They do not aspire to ‘become like them’. This phenomenon underlines Cohen’s conclusions (1988: 383) about the mixed effects of ‘commoditisation’ in tourism: some local cultural values may be negatively affected, but others may be redefined or reinforced. It has to be noted, however, that much will depend on the extent and manner of outside interventions.

The relative autonomy and independence of the Suri way of life, and the ability to ‘resist’ or ‘contest’ the tourist challenge, will gradually erode, and social transformations will occur. Tourists will keep coming. There has been a foreign missionary station among the Suri since 1990, and government political interference has become stronger since 1991.

The Suri will also find themselves increasingly connected to the global economy. This is most obvious in the recent National Parks Project. The European Union has financed a large, five-year development project in Ethiopia (of some 16 million ECU) to upgrade and redevelop the national parks and game reserves in the south of the country, with the underlying aim of stimulating wildlife tourism from the EU to Ethiopia (on the basis of the example of Kenya). These plans, fuelled by global concerns about wildlife diversity and conservation as well as by the long-term commercial interests of the tourist sector, did not initially consider the position of the Suri and other local groups. Of course, the Suri experience with future game-park tourism may have some tangible benefits, certainly in the short-term. The influx of cash will mean roads, clinics, schools and the drilling of water holes.<sup>20</sup> Some of these have already been realised. However, when the benefits of the EU project (finances and manpower) recedes after some years starting in late 1998, when the project will be phased out, the Ethiopian government will not be able to maintain the level of local services or infra-

20 These were announced in the first (1993) program-document of the Agriconsulting Group which made a feasibility study for the project.



structure, and the improvements will wither away. Moreover, a largely non-local elite will profit from the proceeds of tourism, not the average Suri.

In the EU plans, the park areas were seen as an 'impressive wilderness' (the tourist image), with the implication that human populations had always been marginal to their existence – although the parks had known human existence for thousands of years and indeed owed their state to prolonged human activity (Turton 1996: 107). In this context we see two rather different views of what is 'real'. There was little detail in the plans about effective integration of local people's (underestimated) knowledge of ecological management, or their need for living space, or the importance of cultural values; the globalist model of top-down planning aimed at 'conservation' and 'tourist management' seems to have taken precedence. It might be advisable for development-oriented people (government agents, NGO staff, and those in the EU game park project) not only to take into account the presence, attitudes and socio-cultural aspirations of local people but also to recognise their right (as the most ancient and most knowledgeable inhabitants of the area) to have their identity as active local subjects respected.<sup>21</sup>

In view of the increasing global flows, local identity in general is becoming more and more fragile (cf. Appadurai 1995). If these local interests and sensibilities are not recognised in such globalist schemes, drawn up largely on the basis of a western approach, problems will arise. If a real role for local populations is not envisaged, the latter can easily resort to ways of undermining game-park tourism, for instance by killing the animals in the park and causing security problems for tourists and others.

## **Conclusions. Globalisation, exotopy and Suri identity**

While tourism itself is a phenomenon of considerable antiquity, in the late twentieth century global conditions allow a large portion of the post-modern industrialised world to indulge in it. Tourist identity is a deeply rooted consumer identity focused on exotopy: the appropriation of otherness (Harkin 1995). It has a value aspect to it often denied by its proponents. The existence of diverging values will always cause tensions in the tourist–'native' encounter, and this holds not only in Ethiopia (or Mexico or Indonesia) but in any other country, the developed west included (Boissevain 1996).

The Suri experience tourism as a disturbance and as a hegemonic strategy to be resisted. They refuse to be 'signs' (of primitiveness, backwardness, tribalism, etc.) in a system of meaning that allows no reciprocity. The tourist effort at inclusion is resisted by radical self-assertion and obstruction, whereby the Suri subvert the script of tourist realism. They refuse to be wrapped and taken home. So far, tourism among the Suri has not undermined their society but reinforced local values and self-esteem. At the same time, they are introduced to the charged symbolism of material exchange through money: money is the new means by which their group culture and artefacts are commoditised and expressed. Lacking another means of meaningful communication in the encounter with tourists, they capitalise upon money and are thus drawn into the idiom of 'consumerism' themselves.

Contemporary tourist identity is a characteristic global consumer identity which has far-reaching implications in a socio-economic and also moral sense. Tourism is an

21 This argument is forcefully made in an unpublished paper by D. Turton (1995).

inevitable phenomenon, enhanced by conditions of modern technology and travel facilities, which diminish the costs of mobility and strengthen notions of virtual 'simultaneity' of place and of experience. In view of the reactions tourism initially seems to evoke in the local settings it penetrates, it is also inherently problematic and conflictual, despite its highly ritualised character. The impact, role and motivations of tourists need to be re-evaluated continuously. For instance, at the present historical juncture, it is highly questionable whether tourists really search for authenticity, which they are said to lack in their own daily lives. This claim, made by MacCannell in his landmark book *The Tourist* (1976), has been challenged by, among others, Cohen (1979; 1988) and Urry (1990). My interpretation is also that post-modern consumer tourists are much more cynical, and are very conscious (not to say arrogant) about the unassailable lead they, as members of a developed industrial/information-age society, have over people in the not so wealthy – or as they see it, not well-organised – societies they visit. That tourists go there is a result of the commoditisation of local culture or landscape in tourist discourse on the home front: a discourse of status competition. Tourists' exploration of these other societies and people is thus primarily to be seen as an act of self-confirmation or congratulation towards social peers in their own society, and not of seeking the 'lost values' of an authentic or affectively rewarding life in the exotope.

Semiotic analysis of tourist behaviour must ultimately come back full circle to the technological-material preconditions of its appearance in affluent societies, which at present reveal a growing tendency toward the expansive consumption of decontextualised or displaced images, circulating globally. Tourism is another act in the politico-cultural drama of hegemonic strife between the global poles variously defined as rich and poor, north and south, developed and underdeveloped. As we saw in the case above, the Suri will be 'made safe' for mass tourism through the noble aim of wild-life protection. The question remains whether a local society like the Suri, subjected unwillingly to tourists, can marshal its few resources of 'counter-discourse' to enhance its interests and collective identity in this political arena where the local and the global meet, or whether it can only resist temporarily before the onslaught of globalising consumer patterns. The latter scenario seems more likely, however much one might regret it.

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